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THE GATEWAY TO WHO YOU ARE

by Amelia Uffelman

Amelia Uffelman is seventeen years old and a senior at Tandem Friends School in Charlottesville, Virginia. She has been deeply involved in theater arts throughout her scholastic career and has appeared in numerous plays. Amelia's most memorable role was as Beatrice in "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds." She plans to attend Warren Wilson College after graduation.

My vocabulary and motor skills have escaped me, and I am only left with the tingle of one of the most lovely things that has ever happened to me. I felt something today that has been described to me my whole life and still, even the most eloquent words could not describe the space I'm in right now. Externally, the sun is preparing to sleep, the grass is ripe with its own color, and the afternoon is settling into twilight, which gives the mountains and homes a surreal light and energy. The world and environment have complied with my one wish for this magical moment, and have become completely placid and serene." ~ Journal entry, Tuesday, *TEEN GATEWAY*

How does one describe experience? Is there a way to categorize a true experience that rattles one's heart and provides a gateway to Who You Are? Two months ago, my parents dropped me off at The Monroe Institute on a rainy Saturday with their blessings and a kiss and gave me one of the wildest, most enriching experiences in my life thus far. I could write this very dryly and just describe the course of events that took place in that one week out of a million, but to describe what happened to me, I have to abandon conventional writing and resort to the language of the heart. When my parents asked me to go to the *TEEN GATEWAY*, I was skeptical, excited, and had absolutely no idea what to expect. I showed up with everyone else, hoping to be able to accomplish whatever it was that we had all come to do. Later in the week and in the months since, I learned that I am still doing what I came to the Institute to do, and there doesn't seem to be any word for that task other than "living."

Something happens when people are placed in a safe, extremely open environment. Somewhere in between "no-time," breakfast, and tapes, we found ourselves being honest, aware, and having absolutely the most wholesome fun ever. All of our words, our bad jokes, our tears, our insecurities, our morning breath—all the stuff that comes with living with people for a week—fell on receptive ears. There was nothing we could say to one another that was not heard, although it sometimes took us a while to understand the intention or truer nature of the comment, and all of us stuck with our issues until we were able to offer each other some help, or at least a laugh. Truly, the most amazing aspect of the program was that fourteen complete strangers, aged thirteen to seventeen, all found each other to be absolutely delightful

human beings. There was no pressure to be or to feel more or less than we were during each second of our six days together. It was exactly perfect to be ourselves and to remind each other to speak our truths, to listen, and—above all else—to care.

The most challenging aspect of the *GATEWAY* was leaving! In talking to each other afterward, the thing that most of us regretted was our inability to tell our peers what had happened to us during the week. We returned to our “normal” lives with tools to access an amazing part of life, and other than to our parents, there was no real way to communicate what had happened. It is difficult when an experience’s two biggest lessons are learning to communicate what is happening inside and also learning that sometimes communication is unnecessary. We all gained from the program exactly what we took from it; from each other, we gained fourteen friends who truly understood.

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